Criticism from Inside the Poem: MOOs and Blake's *Milton*

Ron Broglio
Georgia Institute of Technology
ron.broglio@lcc.gatech.edu

Abstract

This paper investigates how literary critics can use MOO environments as a heuristic for the investigation of literary texts. Most MOO scholarship addresses issues of player identity and chatting in the textual field of MOOs; in such work the "background" landscape of the MOO as a "place" gets overlooked. As an investigation of the role of place in MOOing, this essay discusses a series of rooms modeled after Blake's poem Milton in which the player occupies the space of the poem translated into a series of MOO rooms. By manipulating objects within the poem space (MOO rooms), the players analyze and interpret the poem from within the poem itself. The poem as place elicits reactions from the player whose responses dynamically change the playing field of the place-poem. Through actions and reactions, the player performs and produces an interpretation of the literary text/place. The result is an immersive textuality.

My goal in this paper is to show how literary problems and digital environments can be coupled to provide a laboratory for critical investigation of texts. Too often digital environments are not used according to the unique capabilities they provide; instead, the digital simply replicates the print medium. For many humanists the only difference by web applications make is that texts are now online as well as on paper. Where critical inquiry can profit from the digital is in thinking about what is medium specific that allows for new means of reading texts. As an example literary text, I have chosen to work with the complex characters and worlds in William Blake's poem *Milton*. As a digital medium, I will detail innovations in programmable chat spaces called MOOs. My method is to leverage those aspects of MOOs that are unique to this application as a means of inquiry into poetry -- including the ability to program details of user-object-space interactions. The challenge in this paper is to utilize the narrative and cosmological demands in William Blake's work while employing the MOO as a digital environment. The goal is to create a method of reading that

is specific to the medium and productive in examination of the literary content.

Blake's poetry and the MOO intersect in their demands for performative interaction between the reader-user and the text. In MOOs, the player must type text line commands that respond to the text of the MOO environment. In his poetry, Blake folds the world of the reader into the world of the text causing the reader's actions in the real world to echo actions in poem. Performance is the space of contact between MOOs and poetry. Before uniting poetry and MOOs in a Blakean MOO space, it is worth considering how the MOO is a performance environment and then how William Blake's poetry is itself performative.

The early years of academic MOOing through the mid-1990s engaged in problems of textual identity. In brief, MOO scholars pondered: Am I who I say I am online? This is evident in the work of Amy Bruckman's "The Turing Game," Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* and Julian Dibbell's *My Tiny Life*. Bruckman, Turkle, and Dibbell are concerned with gender identity in online environments where one can pose as something other than one's so-called real life self. They also examine how gender, ethnic, and social differences are manifested and fashioned through text chat. With the advent of instant messaging and simple browser chat rooms, textual identity is no longer an issue only in MOOs. From chatting to e-mails to online identity theft, the problems of identity are much broader than what takes place in a MOO. On the other hand, identity problems use only a narrow part of the MOO application. MOOs are not just textual conversations between characters. Player are chatting inside an environment. MOOs provide rooms with descriptions and opportunities to interact with the space. They also house objects that players can manipulate. Furthermore, today's MOOs are not just verbal; they are also highly visual. Players interact with images as well as text. Criticism needs to take into account such variables in thinking about player interaction when MOOing.

MOOs are best characterized as immersive spaces. Players are *inside* robust environments that present a variety of options. The look and feel of the space and its objects effect the way characters interact. Consider the simple example of players in a space called The Library. Interaction in this space would be very different if we simply changed the name of the room to The Circus. Nothing about the properties of the room change except the name, yet player response to the space is markedly different. This simple example shows how the background stage upon which human dramas are played out can have an active role in shaping characters, con-

versations, and performance. If images and further textual description and objects are added to the environment, we see how multilayered and semantically complex a MOO space can be. MOOs are different from other chat environments because of their powerful sense of space.

Adding to the complexity of MOO spaces, a player's decisions in the space affect the surrounding environment. So, for example, if a player in The Library chooses to begin reading a passage aloud from a book object called "Milton's Paradise Lost," the other players in the space may find themselves drawn into a conversation about this poem. In a more dynamic example, if a player in a room called The Circus begins to pull on the trunk of a preprogrammed object called Elephant, he may set the room into a chaotic stampede. These examples remind us that MOO environments are dynamic and organic. They change according to actions within the rooms -- actions that are set off by players, other objects, or variable such as time of day or MOO weather. It is helpful to think of a MOO not as a set of objects but as an event that encompasses the various objects and changes their relationships. Considering a MOO as an event rather than as a space has the advantage of thinking about changing relationships among objects rather than the traditional view of a MOO as a placeholder for human conversations.

Recent MOO developers are seeking more dynamic MOO interactions. They are looking for environments to develop problem solving and narrative gaming. The problem then is how to program event structures. How do we make MOOs into spaces of performance? The goal is to provide users with a robust set of options and, based on their choices, create new spaces and interactions. At the same time, choices should not come simply from the players. An organic space develops even without players present. Objects too should be programmed with variables that allow them to grow and change over time independent of player interaction. This means rooms and objects should be "event aware." That is, rooms should be able to register when a new object enters a room (by throwing an on_enter command), leaves the room (throwing an on_exit command), or does something unique in the room (having a MOO dog throw an on_bark command, for example). The room registers the event and sends rippling effects to other objects and players in and outside the room that are registered with the on_enter, on_exit, or on_bark commands. Event aware rooms are the basic building block for MOOs as event spaces and objects as organic rather than player driven.

So, as an example of an organic space, consider something we

have built in Romantic Circles MOO, a Valley room with several flower objects. If a programmed cloud that randomly wanders the MOO enters the Valley frequently enough and rains on the flower objects, they will produce offsprings. If the cloud does not float into the room and rain, the flowers will die. Now, if the flowers end up growing in overabundance, they could spill out into other rooms of the MOO, something like *Star Trek*'s "Trouble with Tribbles" episode. Consequently, the MOO changes without anyone being present and without predictable outcomes. All this is simple programming. It means adding a tick mark every time it rains (via an on_rain commad) and it means keeping track of ticks in relation to the MOOs time clock. Enough ticks cause an object that has been given building permissions to duplicate itself. Enough flower objects in the room causes a move verb to teleport some of the flowers to another designated or randomly picked room.

The MOO is a space of performance where objects and players interact and create events. The robust capabilities of MOO objects and rooms means that MOOs are more than simply chat spaces. They are environments that cause us to rethink the relationship between the background stage and people as players on stage. The environment itself is an active agent in players' use of the digital space.

The flexibility and variables of MOO environments is met by the complex characters and cosmologies of William Blake's poetry. Indeed, it is Blake's visionary Romantic poetry that provided me with the initial impetus for thinking of the MOO as an event space. My initial goal was to create MOO spaces in which players could immerse themselves inside a poem by William Blake. In order to appreciate the way Blake stretches notions of performance and space, I will give a brief example from his prophecy *Milton*.

In brief, Blake's *Milton* is about spiritual inspiration through poetry and apocalyptic revelations that result from following such inspiration. As the poem opens, Milton finds himself in a seemingly heavenly world surrounded by the Eternals. A bard sings to the Eternals about the fall of Satan. The Eternals are angered by the song and the bard takes refuge inside Milton. The poet now possessed by the bard awakens to the realization that he is in heaven alone, without his female counterpart, his Emination. To regain his Emination, Milton takes off the robe of promise and descends to earth in what he believes will be his Eternal Death. He does not die but rather in his descent does battle with Urizen and Satan then arrives in Blake's garden or alternately in Blake's left foot to inspire

William Blake to write the poem *Milton* and signal the apocalypse.

As has been observed by various Blake scholars, much of his poetry depends upon perspectival shifts (Ault 1-7). In *Milton*, what the Eternals see from their thrones on high is very different from what Milton sees in his descent. The Eternals and Milton occupy the same epic poem but dissonant spaces and points of view. The Eternals believe Milton has fallen into death. Milton, in his fall, struggles with Satan and Urizen in order to gain life for himself and his beloved Ololon. Urizen sees Milton not as the creator but as the destroyer of life and law. Indeed Milton is figured as a New Testament Christ come to destroy Urizen's too harsh Old Testament laws. From even this summary version of the poem, the shifts in perspective and worlds within the epic world are evident. Milton's fall initiates a new space and time that disrupts the space of the Eternals and Urizen to create an apocalyptic new world. In Blake's words "And thou O Milton art a State about to be Created/ Called Eternal Annihilation that none but the Living shall/ Dare to enter" (32:26– 28).

As I explained at the beginning of this paper, the challenge set forth is to engage the narrative and cosmological demands in William Blake's work while exploiting the potential of the MOO as a digital environment. Making a MOO into a space for immersive textuality means taking the dynamic space and objects in a poem and translating them into the flexible MOO environment of organic spaces and objects. Along with a small undergraduate team of programmers at Georgia Institute of Technology, I have designed a prototype MiltonMOO space inside *Romantic Circles* Villa Diodati MOO.[1] I would like to give a few examples of from this space to illustrate the ways poetry can stretch how we think of MOO programming and MOO environments.

To show perspectival differences between the characters Milton, Eternals, and Urizen, we have created a generic costume closet. The closet allows any player character to change his or her identity into that of the named characters in the poem.[2] Often, almost unwittingly player actions cause these transformations as they do in Blake's *Milton*. The closet stores the player's normal name, description, gender and other fields then gives the player the name and description of the poem character. So, you actually become Milton. Other players may, along side you, be Milton or the Eternals or Urizen. The costume closet allow for some good role playing. However, we have pushed the perspectival differences a bit further. The EnCore MOO's built-in _html function serves a web page version of the MOO room in the right hand screen for players to visualize the

space. Using event aware rooms, we throw an on_enter commad for players entering MiltonMOO space. If the player's name is Milton, the _html throws a different image and description from what a normal player would see. If the player's name is Eternals or Urizen, they too will see different screens according to the character's disposition. The result is that the visual and descriptive elements of the space are dependent upon who you are. Different characters are in the same room but see different rooms—a perspectival difference. Not only do they see different rooms, but only some of the many objects in the room are visible to any one character. Based on the character's world-view, some objects are existent and others are not. In this way each character in the space has a different set of options and is presented with a different world.

By becoming a character and being embedded in an environment that is sensitive to character identity and presents different object interactions based on who you are and what stage of the poem you are in, the MOO provides a unique space for immersive textuality. Successful translation from poem to MOO means that MOO players situate themselves *inside* the poem. Importantly for criticism, this means that the critic is situated within the object of study rather than separated from it with a "critical" or "objective" distance. Blake's demand that we "open the doors of perception" begins with the collapse of distance between the reader and the text or in this case, the typing player and the MOO space. Blake becomes possessed by Milton who falls through the sky and lands in the visionary poet's left foot and commands him to write the poem *Milton*. So too, the MOO player in the MiltonMOO space becomes possessed by other character identities. The MOO becomes a performance of player-space interaction... an event waiting to happen or, indeed, happening even when we are not logged in.

Endnotes

[1] The Villa Diodati is located at http://www.rc.umd.edu:7000. The MiltonMOO space begins with MOO object #XXX called "Beulah." After logging into the Villa MOO, type "@go Beulah" to get this Blake space.

[2] An effective and simple example of the closet is found in the Frankenstein rooms. Type "@go Costume Closet" or "@go #XXX". In the case of the Frankenstein rooms, users can change their names to characters in the novel such as Elizabeth, Victor, and Monster. When entering the Laboratory next to the costume closet room, each player sees a different space. Victor sees the lab as a pleasing scientific arena while Elizabeth is disgusted by its gothic lighting, mangled body parts, and shocking machinery. The Monster sees the place of his birth with all the mixed emotions this entails. Each character has different object from the room visible and other obfuscated according to their sense of the space and their respective knowledge about science.

Works Cited

Ault, Donald. *Narrative Unbound*. Barrytown, N.Y. : Station Hill Press, 1987.

Blake, William. *Milton*. Editor Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi. Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.

Berman, Joshua and Amy Bruckman. "The Turing Game: Exploring Identity in an Online Environment." *Convergence* 7(3): 83-102, 2001.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Dibbell, Julian. *My Tiny Life*. New York: Holt, 1998.